

Are we Just the Puppets of Our Emotions?

written by Mick Gordon



In our previous Theatre Essay, *On Ego*, the neurologist Paul Broks and I examined brain architecture in relation to personal identity. Now, in *On Emotion*, we begin to deconstruct the architecture of the theatre's most vital tool: emotion.

It is generally agreed that there are six basic emotions: fear, sadness, anger, surprise, joy and disgust. We share these basic emotions with the great apes and other mammals. And yet they are central to our human experience. They make us what we are. They give our lives meaning; make life worth living, or perhaps ending. They raise us to the pinnacle of spiritual and artistic experience. They do all of this. And yet, they often seem to be beyond our control.

As with a written essay the starting point for a Theatre Essay is a question. And finding the most theatrically vibrant question to ask of our theme informs the making of our work. Investigating emotions relationship to thought would be fundamental. So we started with: Are we pulled and pushed by forces we can't control? Moved to: Is rational thought like so much steam from a kettle, secondary to the heat? Got lost in: Are we simply the dupes of nature's cruel joke: the illusion of free will? And finally arrived at: Are we just the puppets of our emotions?

The use of puppets and puppetry to explore the human condition has a noble history. Puppetry pre-dates theatre, and has been used in almost all human societies both as an entertainment and ceremonially. It seems that the mechanistic nature of puppetry allows us a space to think about our own workings. And the magic of puppetry, the transformation of an inanimate object into something living, raises questions about the magical thinking that connects us all.

To take responsibility for our emotions seems crucial if we want to build successful relationships with ourselves and with others. How to do this, and remain open to the new experiences that life brings, is one of the great challenges and joys of being human.